DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 216 CG 017 490

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TITLE The Deferent Self: Attributions of Personal Causality to "Impersonal Forces."
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Society of Social Psychologists (Winston-Salem, NC, 1983).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; Philosophy; Reference Groups; *Self Concept; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Social Psychology
IDENTIFIERS Deference

ABSTRACT

Current social psychological analysis of the self is characterized by three principles: the self is bounded and concrete; the opinions of others are valued for self-definition, self-evaluation and the maintenance of self-esteem; and the road to fame is paved with one's own actions. Attributions of causality for one's actions traditionally have followed one of three philosophical viewpoints, i.e., regularity theory, necessity theory, or activity theory. Under regularity theory, knowledge is assumed to be derived from experience, based on repeated observations of contiguous events. Necessity theory assumes an a priori knowledge of succession in time, as seen in casual chains, process models, and structural equation analyses. Activity theory regards human agency as the paradigmatic instance of causality. A social psychological analysis of causality must include three themata: (1) human agency; (2) single instances; and (3) true cause as a subset of the events' antecedents. Recent literature proposes an integrative model that places attribution for success and failure in the social context of presenter and audience, in which the presenter assumes more credit for success than blame for failure. However, exclusive concentration on self-presentational effects in attribution presents an incomplete picture of the human condition. In many instances, attribution for success must be shared with impersonal forces outside the self. Some evidence exists for the attribution of positive achievements to superphysical causes. Laboratory research must now demonstrate that the self will share its accolades with an intangible impersonal force. (BL)

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The Deferent Self: Attributions of Personal Causality to Impersonal Forces

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Southeastern Social Psychologists, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1983. Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. Kelly G. Shaver, Department of Psychology, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, 23185

CG 017490

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Abstract

Naive psychological analyses of the self, and the social psychological literature, describe a predominantly aggrandizing self. This self has identifiable boundaries, values the opinions of others, and seeks their approval in part by exaggerating its successes and minimizing its failures. It is argued on the basis of two general examples that attribution theory and research should not restrict their interest to this narrow view of the self. On the contrary, there will be important occasions on which the self will attribute its successes to impersonal, even superphysical, forces beyond its boundaries.

The Deferent Self: Attributions of Personal Causality to "Impersonal Forces"

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There is no way to preserve life...
Sadly together we shall slip away.
That when body decays Fame should also go
Is a thought unendurable, burning the heart.
Let us strive and labour while yet we may
To do some deed that men will praise.
Wine may in truth dispel our sorrow,
But how compare it with lasting Fame?

This is a translation of part of a fourth century Chinese poem by T'ao Ch'ien, and the message of striving it conveys also characterizes much of current social psychological analysis of the self. Today's goals may be more immediate--self-protection, self-presentation, or symbolic self-completion--but the three principles inherent in the poem establish the limits of contemporary discourse regarding the self.

The first principle is that the self is bounded and concrete. Its constituents can be the psychological and material elements first outlined by James (1892) or the physical attributes, interpersonal relations, and academic characteristics that comprise Shavelson's Self Description Questionnaire (Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). In either case a finite set of attributes is assumed, descriptive

dimensions are proposed, and it is argued that "the self" can be represented as the individual's location in this multidimensional space. By such a location can self be distinguished from other or from the external world. Just how much one's location in this space can influence behavior is illustrated by work on self-schemata (Markus, 1977) that shows present effects of a past self. Thus in social psychology the self is regarded as a finite and enduring entity, a partially closed system with identifiable boundaries.

The second principle is that the opinions of others are valued--for self-definition, self-evaluation, and the maintenance of self-esteem. From the metaphorical looking-glass of the symbolic interactionists (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) to the tangible mirror of objective self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1872) and self-focused attention (Carver & Scheier, 1982), self-assessment has been thought to depend on the view from outside. From the unidirectional drive upward posited by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) to the notion of self-evaluation maintenance (Tesser & Campbell, in press; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983) the comparison of one's own performances with the performances of others has been regarded as a source of potential self-worth. The social scientist may be content to place the self at a point in some multidimensional space, but the individual requires, in addition, the opinions and locations of relevant others.

The third principle is that the road to Fame is paved with one's own actions. We do deeds we hope men, and women, will praise. But in a world of individual preoccupations, we cannot merely wait for those deeds to receive the attention they deserve. Like so many fledgling academics, we publish so as not to perish. We dress for success, we read how to get power and how to use it. We send typed Christmas chronicles to our friends.

In contemporary social psychology this sort of advertisement is represented in the theory of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Not only do we claim a face and a line (Goffman, 1959) and expect others to help maintain them, we use cultural and linguistic symbols to cover the blemishes in our make-up. The symbolic self-completion research indicates that those who are number two really do try harder.

How does a clearly demarcated self that values the opinions of others attribute causality for its actions? Before answering this question, let us condider the concept of causality in more detail. The idea of causality has a lengthy philosophical history, but the question "what is cause?" is still very much open. There are three widely debated schools of thought on the topic--regularity theory, necessity theory, and activity theory--the last of which most closely approximates what a psychologist would mean by causality.

Regularity theory is founded on Hume's empiricism (Hume, 1952), the view that all knowledge is derived from experience. If, in our experience, two events are contiguous in space and time and have been constantly conjoined such that one event always precedes the other, we will conclude that the preceding event is the cause of the subsequent event. But it is our experience, not any intellectual examination of the presumed cause prior to experience with that cause, that gives rise to the relation of cause and effect. The major import of Hume's work is that there must be repeated observations of the constant conjunction in order to infer causes. This regularity of the constant conjunction can be seen in current attribution theory in the covariation notions of Kelley (1967, 1973). Unfortunately, the regularity theory does not provide an adequate explanation for the

attribution of causality for a single observed instance of action.

Perhaps the best known criticism of Hume's view of causation is contained in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1952). By Kant's own admission, his purpose was to engage in a critical inquiry into the faculty of reason, concentrating on the cognitions it may obtain "without the aid of experience..." (p. 2, emphasis in original). Although there is still scholarly disagreement regarding just which portion of the Critique constitutes Kant's answer to Hume, most writers believe that the reply and evidence are contained in the "Second Analogy of Experience," a section in which the subjective order of knowledge represented in a perception of an object is distinguished from the objective order of succession reflected in the perception of an entity moving through time. Standing outside a house we could begin perceiving the house at the roof (working down), or we could begin at the foundation. Nothing inherent in the house indicates the order in which our perception arises. By contrast, standing next to a river we can perceive a ship floating downstream from only one direction--the direction of its passage before us. We can immediately grasp the difference between these two examples. That we can do so, Kant argues, requires an a priori knowledge of a principle of causality that involves succession in time. This philosophical position can be seen in current attribution literature in the examination of causal chains (Brickman, Ryan, & Wortman, 1975; Vinokur & Ajzen, 1982), and in the methodological advantages claimed for various process models (Smith & Miller, 1983) and structural equation analyses of attributional data (Taylor & Fiske, 1981).

Although modern versions of regularity and necessity theories are part of the attribution literature, neither philosophical position is able to give a complete account of precisely those events of greatest interest to attribution: specific cause-effect sequences initiated by independent human agents. Such sequences are more persuasively explained by activity theory, the philosophical position that regards human agency as the paradigmatic instance of causality. The roots of activity theory can be traced to Reid's (1863) "common sense" critique of Hume's constant conjunction, but the most complete account of the theory was provided by Collingwood (1940) Whether the event produced is the action of a person or a change in a state of nature, the critical element of causality is direct intervention by a person. Our understanding of this sort of causality presumably arises from our introspective examination of the exercise of our own will. In the attribution literature this position is most apparent in Heider's (1958) contention that intention is the central feature of personal causality.

From a more extensive review of the philosophical issues Shaver (in press) has argued that a social psychological analysis of causality must include three general themata. First, drawing heavily on activity theory, causality must include human agency as a fundamental idea. This idea of causation includes temporal precedence (cause before effect) and the notion of causal necessity. Second, causality must include single instances, rather than being restricted to an inference from multiple observations. Although the scientific search for causal principles should encompass repeated observations, the principles so identified must be able to account

for a perceiver's inference from a single instance. And third, the true cause of an event will be a subset of the antecedents of the event. Some antecedent conditions will be irrelevant to the occurrence, others will be obstacles to the occurrence, and only a few antecedents will possess causal efficacy (Shaver, 1981).

With this view of causality in mind, let us return to the issue of how the clearly-demarcated self attributes causality for its actions. To attain high status in the eyes of others, the self should exaggerate its credit for successes, noting its intentional, direct, and essential contributions to the outcome--contributions made in close temporal proximity to the occurrence of the effect. If under most circumstances the self should exaggerate its credit for success, so should it typically minimize its contribution to failure. In the absence of countervailing interpersonal demands, such as a need for modesty, the self should note its physical or psychological distance from failures, and where such distancing is implausible attribute its participation either to external coercion or to an accident. "I didn't mean to do it" is an excuse learned early in life. Not surprisingly, there is a substantial social psychological literature showing that just such "self-serving biases" affect causal attributions for success and failure.

It is not our purpose here to review this extensive literature; that has already been accomplished by others (Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975; Weary & Arkin, 1981). Indeed, Weary and Arkin (1981) have proposed an integrative model that places attributions for success and failure in the social context provided by (a) general social norms governing exchange, (b) characteristics of the "presenter" and the audience, and (c) the presenter's strategic goals for the interaction. It is only within this

extended social context that the actual performance (present and future) on the task will be the subject of causal interpretation by the presenter. The audience reactions (both to the performance and the interpretation of that performance) will affect the self-perception of the presenter, and this information may interact with the actual task performance to change the self-concept of the presenter.

Recent research has continued to suggest limits on the motivated tendency to take more credit for success than blame for failure. Asymmetric attributions may be more likely in single-instance performances than in repeated-instance performances (Rusbult & Medlin, 1982). Self-presenters may pay a high price in lowered estimates of modesty and honesty by making internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure (Carlston & Shovar, 1983). And there may be internal reasons for the asymmetry in attribution that are quite independent of self-presentation considerations (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982). Finally, although we do not agree, there are those who argue that it is impossible--given the current state of theory and technology--to distinguish truly self-serving attributions from truly cognitive ones (Tetlock & Levi, 1982). The characteristic features of the self, generations of psychological theory and research, and the headlines in the daily newspapers make it difficult to believe that human beings are, in reality, information processors with no personal motives to satisfy.

We do, however, believe that an <u>exclusive</u> concentration on self-presentational effects in attribution will paint an incomplete picture of the human condition. The self may have identifiable boundaries, it may value the opinions of others, and its judgments of causality may in many cases be tinged with strivings for approval. Yet there are

also instances in which the boundaries of the self are shifted, in which the opinions of others are discounted, and in which personal causality for success is relinquished in favor of an alternative. Any complete theory of the attribution of causality must not ignore these other instances.

Consider two specific examples. The nation recently commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the March on Washington, the gathering during which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave an oration for equality that contained the now famous refrain "I have a dream...." As much as any other single event, that speech galvanized the conscience of the nation, and some historians regard it as a crucial turning point in the public attitudes toward civil rights. It was, in short, the kind of success for which even a humble man like King might justifiably take full personal credit. In a television interview last July, however, Coretta Scott King noted that her husband had not presented his prepared address on that day. He had expressed dissatisfaction with his written text, and had simply let "the Spirit move through him." The result--attributed by millions to the personal dispositions of Dr. King--was the "I have a dream" speech. Those fond of "proportion of the variance accounted for" arguments will naturally wonder whether the Spirit would have moved quite so eloquently through just anyone. Whatever the answer to such a question might be, all that is necessary for our present argument is to show that the actor, himself, largely externalized the credit for this success when even the most pervasive demands for modesty would have permitted otherwise.

It is, of course, possible to argue that what distinguishes a truly great person from the rest of us is at least our relative frequencies of occurrence. Why should a complete attribution theory not admit of an occasional exception? To counter the relative infrequency objection, our

second example comes from the written materials of Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization justly proud of its positive achievements with literally millions of alcoholics. As proud as the organization is, pride in accomplishment--or in the terms we have been using here internal attribution for success--is something discouraged for individuals in the program. In a chapter entitled "There is a solution" appears the following quotation,

> The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows, and toward God's universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves. (1976, p. 25, emphasis added.)

This is the opinion of the anonymous authors of the volume, and its attributional implications are clear. As has already been noted in an attributional analysis of alcoholism (McHugh, Beckman, & Frieze, 1979), the Alcoholics Anonymous approach absolves the individual of personal responsibility for past failures while at the same time insisting that the individual does have the responsibility for the future. But future successes cannot be achieved without spiritual intervention and belief. Attributions for success must be shared with impersonal forces outside the self.

There is already some evidence that attributions for the positive achievements of others will, where appropriate, be attributed to superphysical causes (Slocumb, Shaver, & Forsyth, 1983). Not surprisingly, this use of superphysical causality was greater among subjects who professed stronger religious beliefs. What remains to be demonstrated in the laboratory, although it is suggested by our examples and by the occasional attributions of task success to luck (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979) is that the self will share its accolades with an intangible impersonal force. Obviously, any such demonstrations will need to show that attributions to intangible impersonal forces are different from "just another external attribution." This has been accomplished in attributions for others (Slocumb, Shaver, & Forsyth, 1983), but remains to be shown in attributions for the self. Whatever our own personal views on religion might be, we have a responsibility as attribution researchers to develop theory that applies beyond the scope of our most typical subject populations--college students who are highly sophisticated at cognitive explanations for all phenomena--to the millions for whom superphysical explanations are part of everyday language.

The aggrandizing self is a familiar friend to modern social psychology, and the poem with which we began shows it to have been an element of the naive psychology of the ancients as well. But what

poem concludes with Spirit speaking to Substance as follows:

If you set your hearts on noble deeds,
How do you know that any will praise you ?
By all this thinking you do Me injury:
You had better go where Fate leads--
Drift on the Stream of Infinite Flux,
Without joy, without fear:
When you must go--then go,
And make as little fuss as you can.

The deferent self, like the aggrandizing self, was part of the naive psychology of the ancients. It belongs in modern social psychology as well.

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